

Research Study - Learning During a Pandemic

Submitted by Katie Woodworth (SRI) and Betheny Gross (CRPE)

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Contact information:

Katie Woodworth - SRI International

katrina.woodworth@sri.com

Office: 650.859.5256 | Cell: 650.906.5053

Betheny Gross - Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE)

betheny@uw.edu

Cell: 201.749.0839

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Project Overview

With support from [the Barr Foundation](#), the University of Washington's [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) (CRPE), in partnership with [SRI International](#) and the [Center for Public Research and Leadership](#) (CPRL) at the Columbia Law School, is conducting a study of New England school systems' efforts to sustain learning in high schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and as the region recovers. We would like to invite your districts to participate in this study.

Through this one-year study we will seek to understand the complex challenges school systems faced during this time, the decisions leaders made to sustain learning in their high schools, the impact the shift of learning to full- and part-time remote had on high school teachers' and students' experiences, and how school system leaders, principals, and teachers are imagining the future of learning in light of the experiences everyone has had with the pandemic. Our goal will be to surface the strategies and solutions you and your staff discover during this difficult time, to elevate the challenges you face along the way, and use your experiences and voices to launch a region-wide conversation about how school systems can rebuild as the nation moves beyond the pandemic.

Research Questions

We will seek to understand critical systems questions related to:

How did districts arrive at their approach and strategies?

- How did districts and states balance the need for flexibility with the need for clear expectations and decisive action?
- How and with whom did they share decision-making and about what?
- How did union relationships and dynamics—particularly teachers unions—influence districts' responses to COVID-19?
- How did relationships with community organizations and community leaders influence districts' response?

What has been the nature of the response in terms of curriculum, instruction, students' experiences, teacher workforce, and school and system policy and structure?

- How do districts reimagine their instructional model and curriculum in light of new educational needs, new opportunities, and new constraints, particularly around resources and shifts in enrollment?
- How, if at all, do districts reimagine their workforce in light of new educational needs, new opportunities, and new constraints, particularly around resources and shifts in enrollment?
- What indicators of student engagement and progress in learning do districts, schools, and teachers focus on to assess their response and how do they measure progress?
- What systems are in place in schools and at the district to learn and course-correct their response throughout the year?

Near and long-term consequences of the response for students, teachers, schools and the system:

- How do those at the school level (teachers and principals) perceive their district's response, their input into the response, and the support they received to sustain instruction amid the disruption?
- How did district leaders perceive their state's response, their input into state guidance and policy, and the support they received to execute on any guidance given?
- What academic progress do students seem to make based on educator and school and district leaders' observations and, to the extent possible, demonstrated in performance data?
- Of the changes that have been made, what do individuals across the system anticipate will "stick" and what do they see as temporary emergency measures?
- How are districts planning for the future of instruction and impending budget shortfalls?

Research Activities

The study will focus on the central office and three high school programs in Lowell Public Schools. The research activities will include interview data collection and document analysis as outlined below.

Interviews: Interviews will be conducted in two waves. The first wave will take place between November 2020 and January 2021. The second wave will be conducted between March 2021 and April 2021. In each wave of data collection, the research team will seek to interview central office staff including the superintendent, Director of Curriculum, Director of Professional Development, Director of IT, and Director of Human Resources (~45 minutes each), high school principals in each of the three Lowell High Schools (~45 minutes each), up to 6 teachers per school (~30 minutes each), and student focus groups including up to 8 students with parent permission per school (~45 minutes each).

Interviews will probe the respondent on the nature of their work this year, how it has changed due to the pandemic, the challenges they have confronted, and the solutions they and strategies they have adopted to help the district and its teachers and students to navigate through the ongoing disruptions.

Data and document review: We will also review public data on enrollment and student outcomes (if available) as well as public documents providing information on district and school policies and approaches. We may ask staff to provide us with documentation or data that are not public but potentially useful to understand and contextualize the interviews. In every case, we will confirm that the data or documentation is approved for sharing and does not burden staff to provide it.

Interview Requests

We understand that you and your staff have tremendous demands on your time. We will do everything we can to minimize the impact of participating in this study. We hope to conduct a wave of interviews this winter and again in the spring to help us understand how plans, strategies, and experiences evolve over time.

In each wave we want to interview key Central office leaders, high school principals, up to 6 teachers in each high school, and up to 8 students in each high school (volunteers with parent permission).

We will conduct all of our interviews virtually and will work with your team to identify relevant central office staff and high school principals. We will work with staff to find an interview time that fits their demanding schedules. In our outreach to teachers we will seek volunteers for interviews and compensate them for their time. If permitted by the district and school, we will work with and compensate a school staff member to help recruit volunteers and coordinate parental permission for a high school student focus group. Students will also receive a small compensation for their participation.

Confidentiality

We will protect your privacy. We have high regard for protecting the privacy of all participating districts, schools, staff, teachers, and students. No individual names nor will the names of the districts or schools be used in any study reporting. You will also have the opportunity to review any final reports resulting from the study prior to their release.

Publication Plans

The research team is planning to release two types of products from this work. You will have an opportunity to review these products before public release.

These products include:

- short, thematic, and action-oriented essays that will be released throughout the study to ensure that school systems in the region and across the country are getting important information in a timely manner
- a final cross-case report that synthesizes the experiences and insights of all five participating districts. These products will be disseminated to stakeholders across New England and the nation, including to policymakers, district leaders, and community groups.

IRB Approval

This project was approved by the University of Washington IRB with exempt status. Our confirmation letter is attached for your reference, as are our interview protocols.

Benefits of Participation

- **Have input in regional and national discussions.** Your participation will help identify best practices, emerging trends, and sticking points that can be addressed through future research, new laws and policies, and collective problem-solving. The information you share will be essential to an informed and nuanced conversation about how to support school systems as they navigate the ongoing pandemic and how to set the course toward rebuilding.
- **Receive feedback.** While this is not an evaluation, it can be helpful to get feedback from a fresh set of eyes. We're happy to share interim findings, new questions we're thinking about, and general observations or suggestions about what we're seeing in your schools.
- **Join a community of leaders focused on the future.** We will convene a panel of school system, policy, and state leaders to reflect on the pandemic's impact on school systems and formulate key policies and strategies that will be needed to support school systems into the future. As a participating district, you or a representative from your district are welcome to join this panel, which we will begin to convene in early 2021.

If you have questions about the project, please contact the study's lead researcher, Betheny Gross, at Betheny@uw.edu.